

XVI ORDINARY TIME– 18th July 2021

THEY WERE LIKE SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD - Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Mark 6,30-34

The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.

And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things.

In chapter 6 of the Gospel of Mark in verse 30 for the only time in the gospel the term "apostles", which does not indicate a function, but an office. Jesus, in verse 7, had sent them on their way to teach and the verb to send in the Greek language is "apostello", hence the term apostle. "The apostles returned.." here too it is important to see the choice of the verb used by the evangelist; for "returned " he uses the verb "synago", hence the evident term synagogue, which makes us understand that the announcement of these apostles does not correspond to that of Jesus, but is still conditional from the teaching of the synagogue, that is, a religious, nationalist teaching.

So, "The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught." but Jesus did not authorize them to teach. In the Gospel of Mark it distinguishes very clearly between two activities and two verbs: the verb to teach, which means proclaiming the Kingdom starting from the categories of the Old Testament, this is exclusive to Jesus when he speaks for the Jews, when he speaks to mixed crowds he doesn't use this verb; while for the disciples the evangelist had said "... he appointed twelve so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach ." (Mark 3, 14) The verb " to preach" means announcing the Kingdom without necessarily basing it on what is in the Old Testament.

So, here the twelve taught, but Jesus did not authorize them and indeed the reaction of Jesus is negative "And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place.." It is the second time in Mark's gospel this phrase appears, this phrase "desolate place", which is always addressed to the disciples, is always negative and indicates misunderstanding. So there is a misunderstanding between Jesus and his group, " Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while." Jesus sees that these disciples are full of enthusiasm and invites them to calm down, why? " For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat." The failure of Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth, a total fiasco, this failure, contrasts with the success of the preaching of the apostles; evidently that the preaching of the apostles is not the same as that of Jesus. "... they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves." The evangelist underlines again " a desolate place", but the enthusiasm is great "...many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns.." meaning a place where there is a synagogue, so the result of the teaching in the synagogue "...and got there ahead of them."

“And they went away in the boat...” strangely only Jesus leaves the boat. He separates himself from the disciples, they are still not able to get in touch with people because they are animated by their desires of religious, nationalist success, with a messiah figure who does not correspond to Jesus. So, only Jesus leaves the boat *“..he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them,..”* compassion is a divine attitude with which life is communicated to those who do not have life of their own, *“..because..”*, and here is a quote from the book of Numbers, when Moses had asked the Lord to put leaders for the people so that they were not like sheep that have no shepherd, the sheep that have no shepherd loose themselves So it is a setting of Jesus that recalls the warning which is already present in the prophet Jeremiah 23, 1 *“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!”* or even Ezekiel 34,5 *“ So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts.”* So, Jesus has compassion for these people *“..because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”* actually there are some shepherds and they also have too many, they just think about themselves, they don't think about the interest of the people.

So, *“..he began to teach them many things.”* And therefore Jesus assumes the role of shepherd, but not with a doctrine to dominate the people, but as the Gospel narrative will then follow, “giving bread”. The teaching of Jesus is food that communicates life, that gives back life and that enriches life.